

UNDER A CLOUD.

A THRILLING TALE OF HUMAN LIFE.

CHAPTER IX.

"TOO LATE!"

"Sir Mark at home, Andrews?" said Stratton as the door was opened by the butler.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Barron's with him, but of course he'll see you. Will you step up in the drawing room? Only the young ladies there."

"No, thanks," said Stratton hurriedly. "Ask Sir Mark if he will see me or make some appointment. Where is he?"

"In the library, sir."

"Mr. Barron with him," thought Stratton as the butler showed him into the dining room and closed the door. "Wonder what he is like. Oh! impossible. How easily a man can be jealous."

As he stood looking up at the portrait of a lady—Myra's mother—he fancied he heard steps in the hall, and directly after the butler entered.

"Sir Mark will see you, sir," said the butler.

"But Mr. Barron is there?"

"No, sir, just gone up to join the ladies." Stratton winced, and the next moment was shown into the library.

"Ah, Malcolm Stratton," cried the admiral bluntly. "Come in, my dear boy. How are you? Glad you've called. My friend Mr. Barron was here. I wanted to introduce you two. Traveled much, but he's chary of making new friends. You'll like him: though, I'm sure. Wonderful fellow at the management of a yacht, and magnificent swimmer. Why, I believe that man, sir, could swim for miles."

"Indeed, Sir Mark."

"Oh, yes; but sit down, Stratton; you are quite a stranger. Want to see me on business?"

"Yes, I—"

But before he could get any further the admiral, who seemed in high spirits, interrupted him.

"Pity you were not ten minutes sooner. Barron was telling me a most amusing story of slave life in Trinidad in the old days. Wonderful fund of anecdote. But you said business or an appointment, my dear boy. Bad man to come to unless its about sea. What is it?"

Stratton made no answer for a few moments. The difficulty was how to begin. It was not that he was strange with the admiral, for, consequent upon the friendship formerly existing between Miss Jerrold and his mother, Sir Mark's house had been open to him times enough. Seeing his hesitation the old sailor smiled encouragement.

"Come, my lad," he said, "out with it. Is something wrong? Want help?"

"Yes, sir, yours," said Stratton, making his plunge, and now speaking quickly. "The fact is, Sir Mark, I have had news this morning—glorious news for me."

"Glad of it, my dear boy. But you look-just now as if you were going to court-martial for running your ship aground."

"I suppose it was natural, sir. Yesterday I was a poor struggling man, to-day I have had the letter announcing my appointment to the Headley Museum, and it is not only the stipend—a liberal one—but the position that is so valuable for one who is fighting to make his way in the scientific rank."

The admiral stretched out his hand, and shook Stratton's warmly.

"Glad of it, my dear boy. My congratulations on your promotion. I shall see you an admiral among the scientific bigwigs yet. To be sure; of course. I have been so taken up with other things—being abroad—and so much worried and occupied since I came back, that I had forgotten all about it. But my sister told me she was moving heaven and earth, and going down on her knees to all kinds of great guns to beg them to salute you."

"Then it has been her doing," cried Stratton excitedly.

"Oh, yes; I think she has done something in it. Do the girls know?"

"No, sir; not yet," said Stratton hastily. "I felt that it was my duty to come to you first."

"Eh? Very good of you I'm sure. I'll send for them. They'll be delighted."

He rose to ring, but Stratton interposed.

"Not yet, sir, please," he cried; "I have something else to say."

"Wants to borrow a hundred for his outfit," thought the admiral. "Well, I like the fellow; he shall have it. Now, my lad," he said aloud as he resumed his seat. "What is it?"

Stratton hesitated for a few moments, and then said hurriedly:

"I have met Miss Myra Jerrold and Miss Perrin frequently at their aunt's, Sir Mark, and to a great extent you have made me free of your house. You will grant, I hope, that feelings such as have grown up in me were quite natural. It was impossible for me to be in their society without forming an attachment, but I give you my word, sir, as a man, that never by word or look have I trespassed upon the kindness you have accorded me; and had I remained poor, as I believed myself yesterday, I should never have uttered a word."

"Humph!" ejaculated the admiral, gazing at him sternly.

"But now that I do know my position, my first step is to come to you and explain."

"And the young lady? You have not spoken to her on the subject?"

"Never, Sir Mark, I swear."

"A gentleman's word is enough, sir. Well, I will not profess ignorance. My sister did once drop me a kind of hint about my duties, and I have noticed a little thing now and then."

"You have noticed, sir?" cried Stratton, looking startled.

"Oh, yes," said the admiral, smiling. "I'm not an observant man over such matters; in fact, I woke up only three months ago to find how blind I could be: but in your case I did have a few suspicions; for you young men are very transparent."

"Really, Sir Mark, I assure you," faltered Stratton, "I have been most guarded."

"Of course you have, my lad. Well, I am a poor pilot in love matters, but I don't see here why we should not go straight ahead. You are both young and suitable for each other. Rebecca swears by you, and I confess that I rather like you when you are not so confoundedly learned."

"Sir Mark!" cried Stratton, his voice husky with emotion, "in my wildest moments I never thought—"

"That I should be such an easy-going fellow, eh? But we are running too fast, boy. There is the young lady to think about."

"Of course—of course, sir."

"Not the custom to consult the ship about her captain, but we will here," cried Sir Mark with a laugh; "they generally appoint the captain right off. We'll have her down, bless her. A good girl, Stratton, and I congratulate you."

"But one moment, sir," faltered the young man; "is it kind—so suddenly—give me leave to speak to her first?"

"No," said the old sailor abruptly; "she shall come down, and it shall be yes or no right off."

He rang the bell sharply, and then crossed back to Stratton, and shook his hand again.

"You've behaved very well indeed, my lad," he said; "and I like you for it. I never knew your father, but he must have been a gentleman. Your mother, Becky's friend, was as sweet a lady as I ever met."

The butler entered.

"Mr. Barron gone?"

"No, Sir Mark."

"Don't matter. Go and ask Miss Perrin to step down here."

The butler bowed, and left the room. Stratton started from his seat with his face ghastly.

"Hullo, my lad! what's the matter? Time for action, and afraid to meet the saucy little thing. I say, you scientific fellows make poor lovers. Hold up, man, or she'll laugh at you."

"Sir Mark!" gasped Stratton. "Ring again—a horrible mistake on your part."

"What the deuce do you mean, sir? You come and propose for my niece's hand—"

"No; no, Sir Mark," cried the young man wildly.

"What! Why I've seen you attentive to her a score of times. I say again, what the deuce do you mean? Why—why—you were not talking about my own child?"

"My words all related to Miss Jerrold, Sir Mark," said Stratton, now speaking in a voice full of despair. "I never imagined that you could possibly misunderstand me."

"But, confound you, I did, sir. What the devil do you mean by blundering out such a lame tale as that?"

"Want me, uncle dear?" said Edie, entering the room.

"No, no, my dear. Run along upstairs. You're not wanted. I have business with Mr. Stratton here."

Edie darted a frightened glance from the choleric flushed countenance of her uncle to Stratton's, which was almost white.

"Oh, poor Mr. Stratton," she thought as she drew back. "Then he did not know before."

The door closed, and Sir Mark turned upon Stratton fiercely.

"Why, confound you, sir?" he began; but the despairing face before him was disarming. "No, no, he cried, calming down; "no use to get in a passion about it. Poor lad! poor lad!" he muttered. Then aloud: "You were speaking, then, of Myra—my daughter—all the time?"

"Yes," only that word in a despondent tone, for he could read rejection in every line of the old sailor's face.

"But I always thought—oh, what a confounded angle. This is not men's work. Why isn't Rebecca here? Mr. Stratton, this is all a horrible blunder. Surely Myra—my daughter—never encouraged you to hope?"

"Never, sir; but I did hope and believe. Let me see her, Sir Mark. I thought I was explicit, but we have been playing at cross purposes. Yes; ask Miss Jerrold to see me here—in your presence. Surely it is not too late to remedy such a terrible mistake."

"But it is too late, Mr. Stratton; and really I don't think I could ever have agreed to such an engagement, even if my child had been willing."

"Sir Mark!" pleaded Stratton.

"For Heaven's sake, let's bring it to an end, sir. I never imagined such a thing. Why, Man, then all the time you were making friends with one cousin, so as to get her on your side."

"I don't know—was I?" said Stratton dejectedly.

"Of course, sir. Acting the timid lover with the old result!" cried Sir Mark angrily.

Stratton gazed excitedly in his face; there was so much meaning in his words.

"There," continued the admiral; "out it must come, sir, and you must bear it like a man. My child, Myra, has accepted my friend Mr. Barron, and the marriage is to take place almost at once."

Stratton stood for a few moments gazing in Sir Mark's face, as if he failed to grasp the full tenor of his words. Then, turning slowly, and without a word, he left the room, walked back to his quaint, paneled chambers, and hid his despair from the eyes of man.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNOPENED DOOR.

Myra Jerrold stood looking very calm and statuesque, with James Barron holding her hand.

"Yes," he said, "I am going now, but only for a few hours. I cannot live away from you. Only a fortnight now, Myra, and then good-bye to cold England. I take you to a land of beauty, of sunny skies, and joy and love."

"Can any land be as beautiful as that which holds one's home?" she said.

"No," replied Barron quickly, "but that will be your home."

"Trinidad," said Myra thoughtfully; so many thousand miles away."

"Bah! what are a few thousand miles now? A journey in a floating hotel to a place where you can telegraph to your father's door—instantaneous messages, and receive back the replies."

"But still so far," said Myra dreamily. "Try and drive away such thoughts, dearest," whispered Barron. "I shall be there. And besides, Sir Mark will run over and see us; and Edith, too, with her husband."

Myra's manner changed. The dreaminess passed away and she looked quickly in her betrothed's eyes.

"Yes, I always thought so," he said merrily. "This love that makes the world go round. That Mr. Stratton, your old friend, is below. Don't you understand?"

"No," said Myra quietly, "not quite."

"I think you do, dearest," trying to pass his arm round her, but she shrank gently away.

"Very well," he said, kissing her hand, "I can wait. You will not always be so cold. Mr. Stratton came to see your father on business, looking the lover from head to foot. I was sent up to you, and soon after our dear little Edie is summoned to the library. Come, don't look so innocent, darling. You do understand."

"That Mr. Stratton was come to propose for Edie's hand?"

"Of course."

Myra's brow contracted a little, and as there was a puzzled look in her eyes he said gently:

"Yes, he has been very attentive to her often. Well, I like Mr. Stratton very much, Mr. Barron."

"James," he said reproachfully.

"James," she said, as if repeating a lesson, in a dreamy tone, and her eyes were directed toward the door.

"I like him, too, now that I am quite safe. There was a time, dear, when I first came here, and had my doubts, I fancied a rival in Mr. Stratton."

"A rival?" she said, starting and coloring.

"Yes; but so I did in any man who approached you, dearest. But there never was anything—the slightest flirtation?"

"No, never," she said quickly.

"Of course not; and I so happy, Myra. You, so young and beautiful, to awaken first to love at my words. But you are not cruel and cold to me still? Our marriage so soon, and you treat me only kindly, as if I were a friend, instead of as the man so soon to be your husband?"

Myra with drehner hand, for the door opened, and Edith entered the room, looking troubled and disturbed.

"Good-by, then, once more, dearest," said Barron, taking Myra's hand, "till dinner time. Ah, Edie!" he said as she crossed the door, which she was in the act of closing. Then, in a whisper. "Am I to congratulate you? My present will be a suite of pearls."

Edie started, and Barron smiled, nodded, and passed out. As he descended the stairs his ears twitched, and his whole attention was aimed to be fixed upon the library door, but he could hear no sound, and, taking his hat and gloves from the table, he passed out of the great hall, erect, handsome, and with a self-satisfied smile, before the butler could reach it in answer to the drawing room bell.

"Wedding a statue," he said to himself. "But the statue is thickly gilt, and the marble underneath may be made to glow without a West Indian sun. So it was little Edie, then. He hasn't bad taste. The dark horse was not dangerous after all, and was not run for coin."

He was so intent upon his thoughts that he did not notice a hansom cab drawn up about a hundred yards from the house, in which a man was seated, watching him intently, and leaning forward more and more till he was about to pass, when there was a sharp *post-post*, which made him turn and scowl at the utterer of the signal.

"Hi! What a while you've been."

"What the devil brings you here?" said Barron.

"To find you, of course," said the man sourly. "Thought you'd be there."

Barron looked quickly toward Sir Mark's house, turned, and said sharply:

"What is it?"

"Jump in, and I'll tell you," whispered the man. "Getting hot."

Barron jumped into the cab, which was rapidly driven off after instructions had been given through the trap to the driver, and the next minute it was out of sight.

Meanwhile, Edie had stood listening till she heard the hall door closed, and then turned to where her cousin was gazing thoughtfully at the window, not having moved since Barron left the room.

"Listening to his beloved footsteps, Myra?" said Edie, sarcastically.

Myra turned upon her with her eyes flashing, but a smile came upon her lips, and she said:

"Well, Edie, am I to congratulate you, too?"

"What about?" flashed out the girl, bitterly mortified by the position in which she had been placed. "Being made a laughing stock for you?"

"What do you mean, dear?" said Myra, startled by the girl's angry way; but there was no answer, and, full of eagerness now, Myra caught her hands. "Mr. Barron said just now that Mr. Stratton came to propose for you."

"For me?" cried Edith bitterly. "Absurd!"

"But I always thought he was so attentive to you, dear. I always felt that you were encouraging him."

"Oh, how can people be so stupidly blind?" cried Edie, snatching herself away.

"It is ridiculous."

"But, Edie, he was always with you. When he came here, or we met him and his friend at auntie's—"

"Leave his friend alone, please," raged the girl. Then trembling at her sudden outburst, she continued seriously:

"Always with me! Of course he was: to sit and pour into my ears praises of you; to talk about your playing and singing, and ask my opinion of this and that which you had said and done, till I was sick of the man. Do you hear? Sick of him!"

A mist began to form before Myra's eyes, gradually shutting her in as she sank back in her chair, till all around was darkness, and she could not see the unwonted excitement of her cousin, who, with her fingers tightly enlaced, kept on moving from place to place and talking rapidly.

But there was a bright light beginning to flash out in Myra's inner consciousness

and growing moment by moment, till the maiden calm within her breast was agitated by the first breathings—the torerunners of a tempest—and she saw little thoughts of the past, which she had crushed out at once as silly girlish fancies, rising again, and taking solid shape. Looks that had more than once startled her and set her thinking, but suppressed at once as follies, now coming back to be illumined by this wondrous light, till, in the full awakening that had come, she grasped the sides of the chair and began to tremble, as Edie's voice came out from beyond the darkness in which externals were shrouded, the essence of all coming home to her in one terrible reproach, as she told herself that she had been blind, and that the awakening to the truth had come too late.

"How could you—how could you!" cried Edie in a low voice, full of the emotion which stirred her. "You thought I loved Malcolm? O Myra, as if I should have kept it from you if I had. Like him? Yes, always as the dearest, best fellow I ever met. I didn't mean it, dear. I never was sick of him; but he used to make me angry, because I felt that he almost worshipped you, and was making me a stepping-stone to get nearer. Well, why don't you ask me why I did not speak?"

There was no reply, and Edie went on as if she had been answered.

"Of course I could not say a word. One day I felt sure that he loved you, and would confide in me; the next time we met he was so quiet and strange that I told myself it was all fancy, and that I should be a silly, matchmaking creature if I said a word. Besides, how could I? What would uncle, who has been so good to me, have thought if I had seemed to encourage it? And you, all the time, like a horrid, cold, marble statue at an exhibition, with no more heart or care, or else you would have seen."

Edie relieved her feelings by unlacing her fingers, taking out her banknote from her pocket and beginning to tear it.

"And now," she went on, "you tell me you believed that he cared for me, and suggest that but for this idea things might have been different. But they would not have been. You are a hard, cold, heartless creature, Myra. He was too poor for you, and not likely to buy you diamonds and pearls like Mr. Barron does. Promise me pearls, would he! Insulting me as he did this morning! Why, I would rather have Malcolm Stratton without a penny than Mr. Barron with all the West Indies and East Indies, too, for a portion. Malcolm is worth a hundred millions of him, and I hope you are happy now, for I shouldn't wonder if you've broken the poor fellow's heart."

Myra could bear no more, and turning sharply towards her cousin she stretched out her hands imploringly, as her pale face and dilated eyes seemed to ask for help. But the look was not seen, for bursting into a fit of weeping, Edie cried:

"But it's too late now! I hope you'll be happy, dear, and uncle satisfied; but you will repent it, I am sure, for I don't believe you love Mr. Barron the slightest bit."

As she spoke those last words she left the room, and Myra was alone with thoughts which grew and swelled till she felt half suffocated, while, like some vibrating, echoing stroke of distant knell, came the repetition of those two words, quivering through every nerve and fiber of her being:

"Too late—too late—too late!"

For the bud of love had been lying dormant in her breast, waiting to expand, and it was opening fast now, as she felt, but only to be withered as its petals fell apart.

Hurried on by Barron's impetuous advances, approved as a suitor by her father, her betrothed's courtship had carried all before it. His attentions had pleased her, and she had reproached herself at times after he had complained that she was cold. One evening, when assailed by doubts of herself, she had applied to her father and asked him if he wished her to marry Mr. Barron, and she recalled his words when she had dreamily said that she did not think she loved him.

"Why, of course I wish it, my darling," he cried; "and as to the love—oh, that will come. Don't let schoolgirl fancies and romances which you have read influence you my child. You esteem Mr. Barron, do you not?"

See had said that she did, and let herself subside into a dreamy state, principally taken up by thoughts of the change, the preparations for that change and visions of the glorious country—all sunshine, language, and delights—which Barron never seemed to tire of painting.

But now the awakening had come—now that it was too late!

That night, hollow-eyed, and as if he had risen from a sick bed, Malcolm sat writing in his chambers by the light of his shaded lamp. The old paneled room looked weird and strange, and dark shadows lurked in the corners and were cast by the flickering flames of the fire on his left.

Since his return from the Jerrolds' he had gone through a phrase of agony and despair so terrible that his actions, hidden from all within that solitary room, had resembled those of the insane; but at last the calm had come, and after sitting for some time looking his position in the face, he had set to work writing two or three letters, and then commenced one full of instruction to Percy Guest, telling him how to act when he received that letter, asking his forgiveness, and ended by saying:

I cannot face it. You will call me a coward, perhaps, but you would not if you could grasp all. I am perfectly calm now, sensible of the awful responsibilities of my act, but after what I have gone through since I have been here alone to-day I know perfectly well that my reason is failing, and that in a few hours the paroxysm will return, finding me weaker than before. Better the end at once than after a few months' or years' living death, confined among other miseries like myself.

It was my all—my one aim, Guest, for which I toiled so hard, fighting for success. And the good fortune has come in company with a failure so great that the success is nothing.

Good-by.

He read his letter over as calmly as if it contained memoranda to send to a friend prior to his departure on a short journey. Then, folding it, inclosing it in an envelope, he directed it, and laid it carefully beside the others on the table before sinking back in his chair.

"Is there anything else?" he said quietly.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

HE WAS A GENTLEMAN

"GENTLEMAN JOE" WAS THE DUDE OF ROAD AGENTS.

A Nevada Robber for Whom Even His Victims Had a Good Word to Say—His Unparalleled Feat of Holding Up Two Stages at the Same Time.

Joe Quinn was neither a terror nor a desperado in the days before the two great railroads crossed the west. He was a gambler, a prospector, a miner, a man who could and did shoot when occasion required, but not one to be warned away by a vigilance committee because he was worse than the average. Joe went broke on cards, got cheated out of a rich "find" of silver, and one day left Virginia City to pick up a new occupation. I had known him personally for two or three years, and from his conversation and general bearing I had no doubt that he was well educated and had been brought up as a gentleman. He left Virginia City to blossom out as a road agent, and he had no partner. I had the honor of misfortune to be a passenger in the first stage he tried his hand on. The spot was between Virginia City and Silver City, and the time 11 o'clock in the forenoon. There was seven men of us besides the driver, and while the four horses were being watered at a creek crossing the road Joe stepped out with a gun in either hand and called for the passengers to descend. I had a seat with the driver, and Joe called me by name as he called me down. It was the first hold-up for a year, and no one was prepared for it. As fast as we dropped to the road he looked to see that all weapons had been left behind, and as we "lined up" he took position between us and the vehicle. He had a clear, mellow voice, and there was no menace in his speech as he said:

"Gentlemen, I have failed at gambling, prospecting and digging. I am now going to try this profession for a while. I want your money. I propose to rob you in a genteel way. Use me as a gentleman and I will respect your feelings in return. Mr. Blank here is my friend, but under the circumstances he will shell out with the rest of you. I will now ask him to introduce me to each one of you in rotation."

SHOOK HANDS WITH EACH VICTIM.

Joe took from me fourteen twenty-dollar gold pieces, and then I introduced him to a Mr. Bascomb, who happened to stand next to me. They shook hands and said they were glad to see each other, and Mr. Bascomb handed out \$130 in gold. So it went clear down the line, the robber trusting to every man's integrity to hand over his entire boodle. In this instance I believe every one of us did, as he got about \$1,300 from the crowd. He did not ask for watches or jewelry, and when some one told him that he had forgotten the stage driver, who stood holding the leaders by the bits, he laughed and called out:

"How much cash have you got about you Sam?"

"About \$30," replied the driver as he produced the coins.

"You are too small pickings, and I know you have a wife and child to support. Now gentlemen, I don't want your firearms, and I don't believe any of you will be fool enough to fire on me when you get hold of them. File into the coach and drive ahead. Should you meet with another gentleman in the same profession it will console you to realize that you have no cash to be robbed of."

A week later, though there were fifty men out looking for him, "Gentleman Joe," as we had titled him from the first hold-up, stopped another stage on that line.

HELD UP TWO STAGES AT ONCE.

After his second robbery he was so vigorously pursued that he had to abandon the Silver City route, but in the course of a couple of weeks he was heard of up in the Humboldt Valley. His advent was characterized by a feat which has no peer in stage-robbing. He caught the up-stage and the down-stage just as they were about to pass each other at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. One had five men and a woman and the other four men, a woman and a boy. With the drivers there were eleven men and all well armed and yet he appeared so suddenly and moved about so swiftly that it was at first supposed there were four or five robbers in the attack. The drivers he paid no attention to, but he lined up the nine passengers, searched the first and made him go through the others. It was said that his haul amounted to \$5,000 and as it was all in gold coin he had it lying on a blanket in the road when the passengers re-embarked and the stage rolled away.

By never interfering with the mails or express matter Gentleman Joe escaped making official enemies. Neither Uncle Sam nor the express officials were much concerned about hunting down a man who did not interfere with their property, and such pursuit as was made by sheriffs ended in smoke. In one year the robber held up thirteen different stages and made a gross haul of at least \$20,000. He was never known to enter a town, and probably lived alone in the thickets and mountains. He had a good horse and two revolvers, and occasionally appeared at a mill or country store to make purchases of provisions. At the end of a year the rewards offered for him amounted to \$7,000. His last hold-up had been on the Yuba River, in California, and seven men set out to capture him. They hired a regular coach, dressed one of their number up as a driver and hid another in the boot, and all were of course armed to the teeth. It may be that Joe in some way got word of what was up, for he caught the coach in a rocky pass, shot the driver off his seat and wounded two men riding within before the crowd were really aware of his presence. When he commanded the reward-seekers to get down they lost no time in tumbling out. He sent the four unwounded men back up the road, stripped of everything, spent half an hour in making the wounded comfortable as possible, and then drove the stage into the mountains and turned the horses loose.